Teaching Critical Management Studies in Business Schools: Does it Matter?

Critical studies in business and management (referred to as Critical Management Studies: 'CMS') have spread widely in last two decades and become a serious academic field of research. The new CMS handbook, which Martin reviews in his essay, is a clear sign of this development. CMS as a movement, intellectually and in terms of scholarship, was largely shaped by Scandinavian and especially British academics. As Martin rightly reminds us, CMS is mainly represented in the fields of OB and HRM. I would add that is primarily limited to business schools in UK. We know that many of the CMS founding scholars in Britain have moved to Business Schools, leaving their former 'home' departments which were mainly situated in the social sciences. As a result, subjects like work, organisation, and industrial sociology together with industrial relations have disappeared from most British sociology departments.

These developments have not been mirrored outside the UK. For example, in both the USA and Germany, where I have research and teaching experience, all the subjects listed above are still situated in sociology departments. When visiting US universities and talking to colleagues, it becomes rapidly obvious that the chances for CMS to gain similar institutional support and status¹ in US business schools as in the UK are quite slim. Most US business schools, with a few exceptions, are highly committed to mainstream rationalistic theories and positivist research methods. What is more, many business schools are run very much like businesses, producing and selling Masters and MBA degrees, and teaching future managers to 'play' with models and numbers instead of critically reflecting on the social nature of management and applying participatory ways of organising businesses (see e.g. Mintzberg, 2004). The situation in Germany is quite similar. However, compared to the USA (and also UK) we find a much smaller population of business schools in Germany. The study of business and management (called *Betriebswirtschaftslehre*, or *BWL*) is usually a part of economics departments, which again makes it rather unlikely that CMS will be able gain a similar influence and status as it does in Britain. Similar to the US, in Germany we find critical scholars in sociology and social science departments, but not in business and management schools or departments. One might ask, however, does it really matter, if you are employed in a sociology department or a business school, or work in Germany, the USA or the UK?

In my experience, it matters very much in which department and country you work as a critical scholar. If your main degree is in sociology, it is difficult to make an academic career within a German *BWL* department or a US business school. This becomes nearly impossible if your research interests and publications are mainly in CMS². Moreover, you should expect to teach more students, in terms of quantity, and, in terms of quality, not the most critical students. My experiences in teaching sociology students are somewhat different. Here I could at least expect a significantly higher number of students who are open to critical theories and interested in

¹ The presence and status of CMS in UK business schools differs among schools. But you do often find it at the UK's leading business schools, such as Warwick and Cardiff, something that is unthinkable in the US and unlikely in Germany.

² Another sign of how strict the separation is between the two subjects is that there are hardly any examples of sociologists appointed as chairs at German *Betriebswirtschaftslehre* Department. This applies of course also the other way around.

alternatives to current mainstream capitalist modes of management and production. Having said that, it should also be noted that students reading business and management studies at a British business school are much more likely to learn about CMS and be confronted with current debates in this area in the classroom, compared to their counterparts in the US and Germany. One might ask: Does this really work or is the idea of teaching CMS at a business school a 'strategic mistake', as Martin asked in his essay?

I would not say it is a 'mistake', but I think that critical scholars in management face some challenges, especially because of the growing pressure to increase the intake of students, especially so-called overseas or non-British students³. This has led, for example in the USA, to an increased commercialisation of business and management education. Most of the Masters and MBA students who come to study at UK business schools to get business and management degrees do so because they want to become managers and/or enhance their current positions and career prospects in their companies, or the companies they hope to work for. This often means that they are not interested in critical approaches to management. My experience, especially but not only with Asian students, is that they anticipate learning very practical things, e.g. how to set up a company, how to manage a business, or how to become a successful manager in an internationally operating firm. They expect business schools to provide them with proper tools that help to create successful businesses and manage them more efficiently. This creates a paradox for many scholars who teach and who are passionately engaged in CMS. These scholars don't believe that there is any one model of how to run a business, that TINA (there is no alternative) approaches to business and management can cause severe problems, that there are diverse forms of capitalism besides the currently dominant neo-liberal model, and that politics and power are crucial to understand why businesses succeed or fail. Compared to our business school students who are looking for rational tools and efficient methods to run a company, we know that all forms of efficient businesses are socially constructed and that what is seen as efficient in one societal context might be seen differently in another, which can lead to contests and political struggles between various groups of managers and other stakeholders. In short, there is an increased challenge for critical scholars when we teach these matters to students who expect clear and simple tools, but receive the message from us that management involves 'dirty politics' and is often more messy than outlined in mainstream business and management textbooks. My approach to dealing with challenges of teaching students who are, as our customers, also asked to assess my teaching, is two-pronged. First, I give them what they expect of me, with the assumption that students need and should get some basic knowledge about key ideas and the rationalistic models presented in mainstream textbooks. But then I also use real live cases – from my own and other scholars' research and media coverage – in which the myriad social and societal complexities emerge. These cases raise their awareness that 'good' managers do not just apply tools but also need to reflect more critically about their role in management and society and that businesses are not just about making a profit and increasing shareholder value, but also have social responsibilities to various internal and external stakeholders. My hope is that this makes sense for at least some of my students, and that they will remember when facing puzzles in their future jobs that being reflective and applying more

³ The overseas students are attractive customers because they pay higher fees than home and EU students, especially at the postgraduate level.

participatory management methods within their organisation can often be more effective than narrowly looking to improve the efficiency of established routines and tools.

I believe that Martin's essay raised very interesting and important questions about the future of CMS. However, I think that his conclusion that CMS is in 'sclerosis' – i.e. that it is of no practical use for business managers – is too narrow. Especially in today's world, where scores of companies and company executives have felt the consequences of ignoring their business' relationship to society, I believe that critical, sociological thinking might provide a useful perspective in the study of management at business schools. This is practiced to a certain extent in the UK, not without challenges, and very little in either the US or Germany. But in such a time, do we want to keep CMS in the closed box of sociology departments?

References

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